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DR SAMUEL JOHNSON AND MEDICINE.

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AN interesting collection might be made of tributes paid to our profession by men of letters. In such an anthology, were it ever compiled, the compliments of Dr Samuel Johnson would take a high place. For example, he often affirmed of physicians —by which term he meant what we understand by doctors— “that they did more good to mankind without a prospect of reward than any profession of men whatever.” He wrote also that medicine is a profession “which must, undoubtedly, claim the second place amongst those which are of the greatest benefit to mankind.” And again (what Boswell called “a just and elegant compliment”) —“every man has found in physicians great liberality and dignity of sentiment, very prompt effusion of beneficence and willingness to exert a lucrative art where there is no hope of lucre.” This is high praise, especially from a man who was not given to flattery. He seems to have been specially impressed by the amount of work that doctors do for nothing, which is not surprising, as he appears himself never to have paid fees. “Illness,” he once said, “is of little expense to me, thanks to the generosity of my physicians;” and when Dr Warren, who was called into consultation in his last illness, was leaving the house he said to him, “Sir, you come at the eleventh hour, but you shall be paid the same as your fellow-labourers. Francis, put into Dr Warren’s coach a copy of the *Lives*.” He always denounced Swift for his “unprovoked bitterness against the professors of physic,” and when others complained of the high fees charged by physicians asked them “to point to a single instance of an estate raised by practice in England”; and yet Dr Richard Warren himself, who had the most lucrative practice known up

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to that time, died worth £150,000! Lettsom and Fothergill also were earning very large incomes, and Mead had certainly amassed a fortune in the preceding generation, and Radcliffe before that. Holding the opinion that he did of doctors we need not wonder that Johnson sought their society. According to Boswell, "he had in general a peculiar pleasure in the company of physicians;" and in the Ivy Lane Club, which he established in 1749, and which consisted of only ten members, there were three doctors. One was Dr William McGhie, who is said to have been a "learned, ingenious, and modest man," and, what is perhaps more to the point, one of the few Scotsmen that Johnson could endure. Dr Edmund Barker, another young physician, was also a member. We are told that he was an excellent classical scholar and metaphysician, but "very slovenly in his dress." Perhaps it was of him that Boswell—ever a *laudator temporis acti*—was thinking when he exclaimed, "There is a general levity in the age; we have physicians now with bag wigs." Chief amongst his medical friends in this Club, however, was Dr Bathurst—"My dear, dear, Bathurst," as he said to Mrs Thrale, "whom I loved better than ever I loved any human creature; but poor Bathurst is dead!" Here a long pause and a few tears ensued. "Dear Bathurst," he said on another occasion, "was a man to my very heart's content: he hated a fool, and he hated a rogue, and he hated a Whig; he was a very good *hater*."

Bathurst was a native of Jamaica, and it was from him that Johnson received into service his black servant, Frank Barber. According to Hawkins—not always a very trustworthy authority—all three medical clubbites unfortunately came to a melancholy end: McGhie "failing in his hope of getting forward in his profession" perished of a broken heart; Barker died in obscurity; and Bathurst, "missing of success," went as physician to the army that was sent against the Havana and died of fever. Johnson thought the conquest dearly purchased by his death. But if his early medical friends were unfortunate, many of those whom he knew in later life were amongst the most successful and distinguished members of the profession in their time. Chief amongst these, and the man who most nearly replaced Bathurst in Johnson's affections—and it was by Bathurst, as a matter of fact, that they were introduced to each other—was Dr Thomas Lawrence. Lawrence was for seven years President of the Royal College of Physicians. He is described as a man

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"of strict piety and profound learning"—both of which qualities would endear him to Johnson—"but unskilled in the knowledge of life or manners," and he is said to have died without ever having enjoyed the reputation he so justly deserved. Munk explains this by saying that "he was above the arts by which popularity is acquired, and had a vacuity of countenance very unfavourable to an opinion of his learning or sagacity, and certain convulsive movements of the head and shoulders that gave pain to the beholder and drew off attention from all that he said." As Johnson was very similarly affected this must have been an added bond of sympathy between them. Lawrence was further handicapped by intermittent attacks of deafness, and when these became permanent Johnson wrote of him: "Poor Lawrence has almost lost his sense of hearing, and I have lost the conversation of a learned, intelligent, and communicative companion, and a friend whom long familiarity has much endeared. Lawrence is one of the best men whom I have known." All Lawrence's works were written in elegant Latin, which he regarded as the only fit vehicle for medical treatises, and Johnson and he corresponded in the same language. The death of Lawrence's wife, in 1780, was the occasion of Johnson writing one of his finest letters, this time, however, in English.

Mrs Thrale gives, in her lively way, an interesting account of a consultation of Lawrence by Johnson when they were both "breaking up": "The conversation," she writes, "I saw them hold together in Essex Street one day in the year 1781 or 1782, was a melancholy one, and made a singular impression on my mind. He was himself exceedingly ill, and I accompanied him thither for advice. The physician was, however, in some respects, more to be pitied than the patient: Johnson was panting under an asthma and dropsy; but Lawrence had been brought home that very morning struck with the palsy, from which he had, two hours before we came, strove to awaken himself by blisters; they were both deaf, and scarce able to speak besides, one from difficulty of breathing, the other from paralytic debility. To give and receive medical counsel therefore, they fairly sate down on each side a table in the doctor's gloomy apartment, adorned with skeletons, preserved monsters, etc., and agreed to write Latin billets to each other: such a scene did I never see." "You," said Johnson "are timide and gelide," finding that his friend had prescribed palliative not drastic remedies. "It is not me," replied

poor Lawrence in an interrupted voice, "'tis nature that is gelidè and timidè."

Another of Johnson's eminent medical friends was the much esteemed Dr William Heberden, whom he described as "*ultimus Romanorum*—the last of the learned physicians"—which seems a little hard on some of our scholarly brethren of the last century to say nothing of this—and of whom Dr W. C. Wells says: "No other person, either in this or any other country, has ever exercised the art of medicine with the same dignity or contributed so much to raise it in the estimation of mankind." Heberden seems to have shared with Dr Brocklesby the rather unremunerative office of physician-in-ordinary to the doctor. Brocklesby was a man whom every one loved. He was, like many eminent eighteenth century physicians, a Quaker, born at Minehead, and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. He practised at Norfolk Street, Strand, and was a near neighbour of Johnson's. He was of a very kind and liberal disposition, proofs of which are that he gave Burke—an old schoolfellow of his, £1000, and that he offered Johnson £100 a year to enable him to winter in a warm climate, and rooms in his own house in Norfolk Street when Bolt Court was thought injurious to his health. This liberality was no doubt easier for him from the fact that he was a bachelor. His conversation, we are told, was abundant and full of all kinds of learning but "sometimes flowed too fast," so no wonder Johnson appreciated him. Other interesting facts in his history are that he recommended music as a mode of treatment, and that he once fought a duel. His clubbable disposition is proved by his having been friends of two such opposite characters as Johnson and Wilkes.

None of these eminent men seems to have been a member of the famous literary club which Johnson founded in succession to the club in Ivy Lane, but he would meet there Dr Nugent, the father-in-law of Burke, Dr George Fordyce and Dr Warren. Nugent was a Roman Catholic, and used sometimes to order an omelet for dinner at the club on Friday nights. Johnson, we are told by Mrs Thrale, "felt painful sensations at the sight of that dish soon after Nugent's death," and cried, "Ah, my poor, dear friend! I shall never eat omelet with *thee* again!" quite in an agony.

Dr Fordyce was physician to St Thomas's Hospital. He is perhaps best known as a great gourmand, but was really, as

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Dr Arnold Chaplin has said, a most sagacious and scientific practitioner and far in advance of his time. He was the author of a popular students' text-book of medicine, which passed through many editions.

Johnson was also acquainted with the illustrious Dr Lettsom, who seems to have formed a pretty just opinion of the great man, for, writing just after Johnson's death to Dr Cuming, he says: "In company I neither found him austere nor dogmatical; he was certainly not polite, but he was not rude; but his language in conversation was sententious; he was sometimes jocular, but you felt as if you were playing with a lion's paw . . . he had a heavy look; but when he spoke it was like lightning out of a dark cloud . . . in social company when he unbended from critical austerity, he afforded the finest dessert to a rational repast." Lettsom's friend and correspondent Dr Cuming,* on the other hand, seems to have shared Horace Walpole's unfavourable opinion of Johnson, whom, however, he had never met. Listen to this: "I could never consider him as an amiable character; sententious, oracular and dogmatical in his assertions; stiff in opinion, narrow and illiberal in his sentiments; . . . he had a feline malevolence in his disposition—a disposition sour and intractable. His political opinions were a jargon of nonsense—his mind was overrun with weak, illiberal and deep-rooted prejudices. His temper arrogant, contemptuous, and insolent; his disposition vain, conceited, sour and often malevolent. Upon the whole he was a most unamiable being." . . . "Few, very few actions of his life or habits of his mind there are that do not stand in need of apology." Pretty strong, is it not, and a rather ungrateful return for the bouquets thrown by Johnson at the writer's profession? But the trustworthiness of the worthy Dr Cuming's judgment may be estimated from the fact that he thought Boswell's immortal biography "wonderfully trifling and inconsistent" and likely to "end fatally for his intellects."

Lettsom was one of the guests at the dinner at which Boswell successfully inveigled Johnson into meeting Wilkes. On this famous occasion Dr Lettsom indulged in a little amateur Boswellising on his own account. "I once," he wrote to Dr Cuming, "dined with him (Johnson), Wilkes, Boswell, and Lee the American—what a group!" "It was ungrateful," said Lee, "for the Scotch, who, when emigrants, always found

* Dr Cuming's name will always be of interest to Edinburgh men as one of the original founders of the Royal Medical Society.

an asylum in America, to be the most violent opponents to American independence, and to oppose their benefactors in the cabinet and in the field!" "The obligation," replied Boswell, "was not so considerable, when it is understood that the Americans sent the Scotch emigrants to Cape Fear, and such like barren regions." "I think," said Johnson, "they acted like philosophers." "Why," Boswell inquired. "Because," added Johnson, "if you turn a starved cow into clover, it will soon kill itself by the sudden transition; and if the Scotch, famished in their own country, had been placed in the more fruitful parts of America, they would have burst by a bellyful, like the cattle in clover." Nobody, adds Lettsom, enjoyed a laugh at the expense of the Scotch more than Boswell, at least when it came from Johnson. It was at this dinner that Lettsom is said to have worn a glass wig, and it would be interesting to know what Boswell thought of this further proof of the declension of the age!

Yet another medical celebrity of his time whom Johnson knew was the eccentric Sir William Browne, who, after making a fortune by practice in King's Lynn, removed to London and took up his residence in Queen's Square. Mrs Thrale describes him as "an odd mortal, with more genius than understanding, and more self-sufficiency than wit," and says that he lived to "a very extraordinary age" (as a matter of fact he died at the age of 82). He explained his healthy appearance—and presumably his longevity—by saying that "he had neither wife" (he was a widower) "nor debts." Browne was certainly an oddity. He went about carrying a muff, a copy of Horace, and a spy-glass, and it is not surprising to be told that he found it difficult to maintain his dignity when President of the Royal College of Physicians, and resigned prematurely. His will is a strange document, of great length and much interlarded with quotations from the classics; it was reproduced a few years ago in the *British Medical Journal*. Among some other curious bequests he left his "worst suit" to his footman and his slippers and all his clothes to his coachman! He also charged his executor to take care of and "indulgently maintain" his coach-horses and his daughter's horse "Clara" "during their respective lives."

Sir William Browne's chief interest for us now, however, is that he was the only person who ever ventured to oppose Johnson when he was extolling Oxford at the expense of Cambridge—which shows at least that he was not devoid

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of courage. Mrs Thrale describes the incident. Johnson had repeated with an air of triumph the famous epigram written by Dr. Trapp on the occasion of the presentation of Bishop Moore's library to the University of Cambridge by George II., when at the same time a regiment of cavalry had been despatched to the sister University to keep the Oxford Jacobites in order.

Our royal master saw with heedful eyes,
The wants of his two universities :
Troops he to Oxford sent, as knowing why
That learned body wanted loyalty :
But books to Cambridge gave, as well discerning,
That that right loyal body wanted learning.

Which, said Sir William, might be answered thus :—

The king to Oxford sent his troop of horse,
For Tories own no argument but force ;
With equal care to Cambridge books he sent,
For Whigs allow no force but argument.

Johnson had the candour to say that "it was one of the happiest extemporaneous productions he ever met with."

Last, but not least, amongst Johnson's medical intimates must be mentioned Robert Levet, the curious, "irregular practitioner," whom he sheltered for forty years amongst that strange company of human derelicts on whom he delighted to bestow his charity, and who died under his roof at the advanced age of 80. Levet, one would have thought, must have had but little in common with Johnson, for he was a man of no education, who, we are told by Macaulay, though on what authority I know not, "bled and dosed coal-heavers and hackney coachmen, and received for fees crusts of bread, glasses of gin, bits of bacon, and sometimes a little copper." Johnson, however, professed at least to have thought well of him in spite of his peculiarities, for on Levet's death he wrote one of his best known poems in his memory, some verses of which are, let us recognise with pride, equally applicable to many a humble practitioner to-day :—

When fainting nature called for aid,
And hov'ring death prepared the blow,
His vig'rous remedy displayed
The pow'r of art, without the show.

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In mis'ry's darkest cavern known,
His useful care was ever nigh,
Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan,
And lonely want retir'd to die.

No summons mock'd by chill delay,
No petty gain, disdain'd by pride ;
The modest wants of ev'ry day
The toil of ev'ry day supply'd.

His virtues walk'd their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void ;
And sure the eternal master found
The single talent well-employ'd.

We have no means, of course, of knowing whether these lines express Johnson's real estimate of Levet, for, as is well known, he held the opinion that "in lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath," but at least he has put it on record that all Levet's medical knowledge, "and it is not inconsiderable," was obtained through the ear. He also said, however, that "Levet is a brutal fellow," but added that "his brutality is in his manners, not in his mind."

With these and his other friends, of what he calls "the physical race," Johnson was no doubt able to hold his own in the discussion even of medical subjects, for his medical knowledge was, as he said of Levet's, "not inconsiderable," and he tells us himself that he was a "great dabbler in physic." "Never think it clever," he said, "to call physic a mean study." Most of his knowledge, especially of drugs, seems to have been derived from Dr Robert James—of "James's Powder" fame—who was an old schoolfellow of his and whom he helped with his great medicinal dictionary. He is said, indeed, to have actually written some of the articles in this monumental work, and he certainly composed the dedication to Dr Mead—the man who, he said, had "lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any one." Omnivorous reader as he was, we may be pretty sure that Johnson had also devoured a good deal of medical literature both ancient and modern. We find him quoting Celsus, and we know that he was so devoted to the study of "chymistry" that he read a text-book of it on his death-bed. Further, as an indefatigable talker and with so many medical friends, he must undoubtedly have acquired a good deal of medical knowledge—again, like

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Levet—through the ear. At all events there is abundant evidence that his knowledge of medicine, however acquired, was both extensive and accurate. His views also were more modern than those of the bulk of the medical profession at his time. Thus he professes himself of that "chymical sect which holds phlebotomy in abhorrence," and disapproved of periodical bleeding. "You accustom yourself," he said; "to an evacuation which Nature cannot perform for you and therefore she cannot help you, should you, from forgetfulness or other cause, omit it." He strongly condemns the polypharmacy which was so characteristic of eighteenth century medicine. "I never thought well," he says, "of Dr James's compounded medicines; his ingredients appear to me sometimes inefficacious and trifling, and sometimes heterogeneous and destructive of each other. This prescription exhibits a composition of about three hundred and thirty grains, in which there are four grains of tartar emetic and six drops of thebaic tincture. He that writes this surely writes for show." It must not be forgotten, too, that in a hard-drinking age he praised, and for many years practised, teetotalism.

That his knowledge of prescribing was practical is shown by the fact that when he was taken ill at Montrose on his journey to the Hebrides he wrote out a prescription for himself in proper Latin form. In fact he was rather too fond of prescribing for himself. On one occasion, near the end of his life, he had taken an unusual dose of squills—a drug of which he had a great opinion—but without effect. He thereupon repeated it and it produced "a most violent operation." "You find me at present," he said to a friend, "suffering from a prescription of my own." This was evidently a lesson to him, for from this period to the end of his life he took no medicine without the approval of Heberden. "Johnson," Fanny Burney wrote in her diary on another occasion, "has been very unwell but he continues his strange discipline—starving, mercury, opium; and though for a time half demolished by its severity, he always in the end rises superior both to the disease and the remedy—which commonly is the more alarming of the two."

Mrs Thrale also records that one day at her house when he had taken "tincture of antimony" by mistake for "emetic wine" in order to produce a vomit, "he was himself the person to direct us what to do for him, and managed with as much

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coolness and deliberation as if he had been prescribing for an indifferent person."

Nor did he confine his prescriptions to himself. He once recommended Miss Boothby, as a remedy for indigestion, "some dried orange-peel, finely powdered, in a glass of hot red port." He wisely adds, "I would not have you offer it to the doctor as *my* medicine: physicians do not love intruders." One cannot help wondering whether it was for the preparation of this "remedy" that he used the orange-peel, his collection of which so greatly intrigued Boswell.

Another time we find him advising Miss Langton that she will soon recover her health by light suppers. "Let her eat at dinner as she will," says he, "but not take a full stomach to bed." Sound advice no doubt, but it is doubtful if he always followed it himself. He did not even hesitate to prescribe for the President of the Royal College of Physicians himself, for when Dr Lawrence was suffering from paralysis Johnson wrote, "I should not despair of helping the swelled hand by electricity if it were frequently and diligently applied."

Although he "did not know a more disagreeable character than a valetudinarian," Johnson was nevertheless fond of laying down rules of health. Thus we find him writing to the Rev. Dr Taylor, "Take care of your health, let nothing disturb you; particularly avoid costiveness, and open no letter of business but in the morning. I have but two rules for you—keep your body open and your mind quiet." Excellent counsel in that or in any age, and the latter part of it curiously modern in sound. To a Mr Perkins (one of the founders of Barclay & Perkins' Brewery), who was going a trip for his health, he wrote:—

- (1) Turn all care out of your head as soon as you mount the chaise.
- (2) Do not think about frugality—your health is worth more than it can cost.
- (3) Do not continue any day's journey to fatigue.
- (4) Take now and then a day's rest.
- (5) Get a smart sea-sickness if you can.
- (6) Cast away all anxiety and keep your mind easy.

"This last direction is the principal: with an unquiet mind, neither exercise, nor diet, nor physic can be of much use."

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It will be observed that Johnson was quite alive to the bad effects of what are now called "anxiety states" on health. He had probably got the idea from Dr Frank Nichols' discourse, *De Animâ Medicâ*, which he mentioned in conversation with Dr William Butter that he had read, and in which Dr Nichols said, "that whatever a man's distemper he could not attend him as a physician if his mind were not at ease, for he believed that no medicines would have any influence." This opinion, no doubt, impressed Johnson all the more, inasmuch as Dr Frank Nichols was at one time physician to the king, but was turned out by Bute to make room for a Scotsman!

But Dr Johnson was not interested in medical practice only. As one inexhaustibly curious in all human affairs he had observed the material side of professional life, whilst in his character of a great moralist he was well qualified to pronounce on questions of medical ethics.

Many people have speculated on what makes for worldly success in the practice of medicine. Johnson had no doubt on the subject. He regarded it as purely a matter of chance. "A physician in a great city," he said, "seems to be the mere plaything of fortune; his degree of reputation is, for the most part, totally casual: they that employ him know not his excellence; they that reject him know not his deficiency. By any acute observer who had looked on the transactions of the medical world for half a century, a very curious book might be written on the fortune of physicians."

On another occasion he fulminated against snapshot diagnosis. "Life," said he, "is not to be sacrificed either to an affectation of quick discernment or of crowded practice, but may be required, if trifled away, at the hand of the physician"—a rather solemn thought for us all. On the difficult question whether a patient should be told the truth about his condition he had again no doubts. "I deny," he said in his trenchant way, "the lawfulness of telling a lie to a sick man, for fear of alarming him. You have no business with consequences, you are to tell the truth." As if he felt, however, that the doctrine was perhaps too high for poor human nature, he added the more doubtful proposition, "Besides you are not sure what effect your telling him that he is in danger may have. It may bring his distemper to a crisis and that may cure him." Last of all comes what we may suspect to have been his real reason—"Of all lying I have the greatest abhorrence of this, because

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I believe it has been frequently practised on myself." But yet, strangely enough, when the truth *was* told him he did not always like it. This is what happened when poor Mrs Thrale tried to avoid telling a lie to a sick man—"On another occasion," she writes, "when he had lamented in the most piercing terms his approaching dissolution, and conjured me solemnly to tell him what I thought, while Sir Richard Jebb* was perpetually on the road to Streatham, and Mr Johnson seemed to think himself neglected if the physician left him for an hour only, I made him a steady, but as I thought a very gentle harangue, in which I confirmed all that the doctor had been saying, how no present danger could be expected, but that his age and continued ill-health must naturally accelerate the arrival of that hour which can be escaped by none." "And this" (says Johnson, rising in great anger) "is the voice of female friendship I suppose, when the hand of the hangman would be softer!" To do him justice, however, when the end of his life approached, he really did practise what he preached in this matter, for in his last illness he insisted on knowing the whole truth from Dr Brocklesby as to his chance of recovery, and refused, as he put it, to be treated "like a woman or a child;" and when Dr Warren expressed the hope that he was better, he faced the facts and replied in real Johnsonese, "No, sir, you cannot conceive with what acceleration I advance towards death!"

Lord Rosebery once said that he should have liked to have driven with Johnson in a motor-car. For my own part, I think I should have liked best to have heard him discuss the question, "Should a doctor tell?" It would have been a first-rate conversational "hare" which would have brought out all his powers of casuistry. One can imagine him addressing Boswell in some such terms as these: "You are to consider, sir, that

* Sir Richard Jebb was apparently yet another of the leading physicians of the day under whose care Johnson came. He was physician to the Westminster Hospital, and afterwards to St George's, and became a favourite of George III., who later appointed him his physician. We are told that he was fond of conviviality and music, but attained a large practice, and that his fees in the three years, 1779-81 (about the time he was attending Johnson), amounted to 20,000 guineas. Before he attained much practice he made no unworthy efforts to become prominent, and when he was successful his patients sometimes complained that his manner was not sufficiently ceremonious. He contracted fever when attending two of the princesses in 1787, and died in that year at the age of 57.

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a physician has a duty to mankind as well as to his patient. I can imagine that in your own case there are many things you are obliged to tell your physician which you would not willingly have made public. But, sir, you are not to blame the physician, for in exposing Boswell he establishes truth. Besides, sir,"—looking slyly at Boswell—"you should have thought of this before you allowed profligacy to engender in you disease."

On another occasion a physician was mentioned who had lost his practice because his "whimsically changing his religion" had made people distrustful of him. Boswell maintained, sensibly enough, that this was unreasonable, as religion was unconnected with medical skill. The great man, however, would have none of it. "Sir," said he, "it is not unreasonable, for when people see a man absurd in what they understand they may conclude the same of him in what they do not understand. If a physician were to take to eating of horse-flesh, nobody would employ him; though one may eat horse-flesh and be a very skilful physician."

We have considered Dr Johnson as a friend and admirer of doctors, as an amateur physician, and as one who delighted to discuss questions of medical practice and ethics. Let us now look at him for a moment in the character of a patient.

His medical experiences began early. As a young child he suffered from "scrofula," which one of his biographers tells us was "derived from his parents or from an unwholesome nurse." This imputation is unjust, for the disease was almost certainly tuberculous glands in the neck, the scars of which he bore through life. It is said also that the sight of his left eye was impaired by the disease—probably as the result of strumous keratitis. It is interesting, as showing the influence of superstition in the eighteenth century, even amongst people who ought to have known better, that he was taken to London when about three years old to be "touched" for the disease, on the advice of Sir John Floyer. Sir John Floyer practised in Lichfield, and was one of the most original physicians of his period, who has perhaps never received all the credit he deserved. He gave great attention to the study of the pulse and invented a special watch for timing it. It is in keeping with the superstitious side of his character that he is stated to have been greatly interested in prophecy. He wrote several medical works, some of which were published by Johnson's

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father the Lichfield bookseller. He was also one of the many doctors who have suffered from the disease which they specially studied, for he was an asthmatic, and wrote one of the earliest and best treatises on the subject, and he was also the first to describe the condition of emphysema. Johnson, in his later years, studied the treatise on asthma, in the hope of getting some hints from it for the management of his own case. "Dr Floyer," he says, "is supposed, in spite of the asthma, to have 'panted on' to the age of 90." "And why," he adds, "were we content with supposing a fact so interesting, of a man so conspicuous? because he corrupted, at perhaps 70 or 80, the register that he might pass for younger than he was. He was not much less than 80, when to a man of rank who modestly asked his age he answered, 'Go, look,' though he was in general a man of civility and elegance." Surely a curious accusation to bring against a distinguished physician. Johnson, however, got little help from the book and found it "by want of order obscure, and his asthma, I think, not of the same kind with mine."

Scrofula was not the only disease with which the youthful Johnson was afflicted. He seems early to have developed what his biographers speak of as "a form of St Vitus' Dance," but which must really have been a habit spasm and which persisted throughout his life. This was the cause of those head-rollings, blinkings, touchings of posts, and awkwardnesses of gait—so that he walked, as Boswell said, as if in fetters—which moved some spectators to ridicule and others to pity. From his youngest days, also, he was distressed by a constitutional melancholy, inherited from his father, which led a certain Dr Swinfen (father of the Mrs Desmoulins who was one of the inmates of Johnson's house), who was consulted about him, to express the opinion that he might some day go mad. This was the worst possible suggestion to have made to a man of Johnson's temperament, and had probably a great deal to do with the constant dread of insanity which overshadowed his whole life.

Of his health in middle life we know little, but it cannot have been good, for we have his own authority for saying that he had never known a day's complete ease in his life; whilst in the preface to the *Dictionary*, he says, "much of my life has been lost under the pressure of disease"; and it was almost inevitable that he should suffer from that *dominus morborum*

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et morbus dominorum which so much afflicted literary men in the eighteenth century—gout. It is said of some people that they are “healthy but not robust.” Johnson was robust but not healthy, for in spite of his maladies he was of great muscular strength, a voracious eater, capable of sitting up to all hours, and of bathing in the sea at Brighton in the month of October at the age of 60! In his later years he developed bronchitic asthma and emphysema, and probably had a high blood-pressure, for he describes attacks of “oppression” in the chest on exertion for which he was in the habit of taking opium, a drug which he was of opinion should only be prescribed “in extreme necessity.” As time went on “cardiac defeat” with increasing œdema of the legs set in. As he said himself, “my diseases are an asthma, and a dropsy, and, what is less curable, 75.” Against this accumulation of physical ills he struggled with dogged courage, exhibiting what some one has called an almost blood-thirsty clinging to life. “I will be captured,” he cried, “I will not capitulate!” His friends Drs Brocklesby and Heberden were assiduous in their attendance, and in the later stages of his illness Dr Butter and Mr Cruikshank were also called in. Drs Brocklesby and Heberden we have met before. Dr Butter was an Orcadian and a graduate of Edinburgh. He first practised at Derby, where Johnson used to visit him and engage him in medical conversation, but obtaining a reputation by a treatise on whooping-cough (the kink cough), removed to London. He is described as having been “too much under the influence of very favourite hypothesis,” or, in plain language, a faddist. William Cruikshank was also an Edinburgh graduate and went to London as assistant to William Hunter. He was chiefly an anatomist, but had a considerable practice as a surgeon in Leicester Fields, and it was in this capacity that he was called in to scarify the patient's legs, for a surgeon in these days, as defined in Johnson's *Dictionary*, was one “whose duty is to act in external maladies by the direction of the physician.” Cruikshank was too nervous to be a good operator in those days when “nerve” was so important to a surgeon, and it is said also that he was “held back by morbid susceptibility and cannot be said to have done himself full justice.” He was, however, of benevolent disposition and a friend of literary men. Johnson liked him, although he was a Scot, called him a “sweet-blooded” man, and included him in his will amongst those who were

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to choose a memento volume from his library. Cruikshank chose a copy of Dr Samuel Clarke's *Homer*, which afterwards came into the possession of Mr Austin Dobson.* Unfortunately poor Cruikshank, like so many of his countrymen, gave way to intemperance and died of apoplexy at a comparatively early age.

Believing, apparently, that in a multitude of counsellors there is wisdom, Johnson also directed Boswell to obtain opinions about his case by correspondence from various distinguished Scottish doctors, and Dr Gillespie, Sir Alexander Dick, and Professors Cullen, Hope, and Munro were consulted in this rather irregular way. Boswell seems to have attached special importance to Dr Gillespie's advice, for old Auchinleck thought so much of his skill that he settled £200 a year on him for five years, and £50 a year during his life as an *honorarium* to secure his particular attendance—a very large sum for a comparatively poor man to pay a doctor in these days. Johnson sent his thanks to Dr Gillespie for his “excellent *consilium medicum*, all solid, practical, experimental knowledge” and to Sir Alexander Dick for the rhubarb which he “so tenderly offers me.”

All these learned men seem to have been agreed that squills was the proper remedy for his disease, or, as Johnson put it in his characteristic way, “the squills have every suffrage,” and accordingly he took that drug in enormous doses. It seems a little strange, however, that none of the Scottish doctors, at any rate, recommended digitalis, for although Withering's treatise on the foxglove and its medicinal uses was not published till the year after Johnson's death, he had used it for nine years before that and it had appeared in the Edinburgh Pharmacopœia in 1783. It is possible that digitalis was the remedy used by a “Dr” Dallaway, an “irregular practitioner,” whom Johnson was urged by a friend to consult as having a great reputation for the cure of dropsies. Johnson, however, perhaps unfortunately, declined his help, saying “it is too late.”

There can be no doubt that Johnson was a very trying patient. We are told that “as he had on account of his bad constitution been perpetually applying himself to medical inquiries he united his own efforts with those of the gentlemen attending him,” which means that he was constantly interfering

* It is now, I understand, in the library of that eminent Johnsonian, Mr Augustine Birrell.

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with the treatment. He was also extremely introspective, and for a time kept a Latin diary of the state of his illness and the effect upon it of the remedies employed. Poor Sir Lucas Pepys, indeed, who was in attendance in the earlier stages of his illness, was once driven to exclaim, "Sir, if you were *tractable* I would prescribe for you." And even the long-suffering Lawrence, in a fit of exasperation with which every doctor will sympathise, told him that "if he (Johnson) would come and beat him once a week he could bear it, but to hear his complaints was more than he could support." He must also have been difficult to nurse, and said of the male attendant sent in to look after him at night, "He is an idiot, as awkward as a turnspit just put into the wheel and as sleepy as a door-mouse."

About eighteen months before his death he had a slight stroke, resulting in aphasia and temporary agraphia. This also he was prepared to treat for himself. "I think," he wrote, "that by a speedy application of stimulants much may be done. I question if a vomit, vigorous and rough, would not rouse the organs of speech to action." Two days later he wrote to Mrs Thrale, "In order to rouse the vocal organs I took two drams. Wine has been celebrated for the production of eloquence. I put myself into violent motion and I think repeated it; but all was in vain." Worse treatment for a cerebral hæmorrhage it would be hard to imagine, although, if it was really a case of temporary thrombosis there would be something to be said for it. When Drs Brocklesby and Heberden arrived their treatment was rather different, but the patient still tried to improve upon it. "They put a blister on my back," he wrote to Mrs Thrale, "and two from my ear to my throat, one on each side. The blister on the back has done little, and those on the throat have not risen. I bullied and bounced and compelled the apothecary to make his salve according to the Edinburgh Dispensatory, that it might adhere better. I have now two on my own prescription. They likewise give me salts of hartshorn which I take with no great confidence."

When his dropsy increased there was a consultation of his physicians to decide whether his legs should be scarified. Johnson wished it done, but the doctors were opposed to it. He then exclaimed against Heberden that he was *timidorum timidissimus*. "How many men in a year," he said to Dr Brocklesby, "die through the timidity of those they consult for health! I want length of life, and you fear giving me pain

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which I care not for." To poor Cruikshank, who ultimately *did* scarify the legs, he cried, "Deeper, deeper; I will abide the consequence; you are afraid of your reputation but that is nothing to me!" Still not satisfied that the incisions were deep enough, he sent, after the surgeon had gone, for a case out of which he took a lancet and again cut himself, after which he plunged a pair of scissors deeply into the calf of each leg. The effusion of blood which this caused was so great that it gave rise to the absurd rumour that he had attempted suicide. In behaving thus he gave another proof of his great courage and contempt of pain, for he never feared the surgeon's knife, and in the previous year when suffering from a "sarcocele," for the cure of which Percival Pott thought amputation might be necessary in order to obviate gangrene, he wrote, "the operation is not delayed by any fears or objections of mine," or, as he put it to Mrs Thrale in characteristic language, "you would not have me, for fear of pain, perish in putrescence." Despite all these heroic measures, however, his disease continued to "advance with acceleration towards death," and when Dr Brocklesby informed him in reply to his own urgent solicitation that there was no hope for him he did "capitulate" after all: "I will take," he said, "no more physic, not even my opiates; for I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded." When urged by a friend (Mr Windham) to take more nourishment he replied, Johnsonian to the last, "I will take anything but inebriating sustenance," and so he died.

It has been remarked, I think by a Johnson club essayist, that Samuel Johnson would have distinguished himself as a lawyer because of his power of penetrating to the essence of a subject and disregarding unessentials. The same quality of mind added to his sterling common sense, his hatred of fads, his prodigious memory, and his keen interest in physical science would have made him eminent as a physician. He had, too, the necessary qualities of heart. He was full of compassion and charity, and it has been truly said "that the lame, the halt, the blind, and the sorrowful, found in his house a sure retreat." Perhaps, however, he might have "failed of success" for the same reasons as his friend Dr Lawrence. He certainly could have never acquired a bedside manner, and there would have been no little likelihood that his appearance and behaviour in a sickroom would, as was said of Levet's, have "disgusted the rich and terrified the poor."

